

# Impact of Social Media on African Youth

*By Grace Commey*



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- To raise awareness on key issues in West Africa;
- To generate debates and discussions on these issues;
- To proffer recommendations on civil society involvement in advocacy;
- To provide recommendations to policy makers.

# Impact of Social Media on African Youth

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## Introduction

In contemporary society, social media has made access to information easier. Social media has the potential to fundamentally change the character of our social lives, both on an interpersonal and a community level (Baruah, 2012: 1). It is obvious that social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, MySpace, Skype among others, are used extensively for the purpose of communication. One of the most important advantages of the use of social media is the online sharing of knowledge and information among different groups of people. Online tools and technology have facilitated communication in countless ways. They have also influenced our perceptions and attitudes towards communication.

Social media refers to websites and applications that are designed to allow people to share content quickly, efficiently and in real time. They are interactive computer-mediated technologies that facilitate the creation and sharing of information, ideas, career interests and other forms of expression via virtual communities and networks (Jan H and Hermkens, 2011: 241). Social media services can be accessed by downloading the services that offer social media functionality to mo-

bile devices like smartphones and tablets or through web-based technologies on desktops and laptops. Examples of social media platforms are, WeChat, Facebook, Google+, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, LinkedIn Instagram, QQ, Snapchat, Viber, among others.

Decades ago, African leaders dreamt of connecting African countries with roads and railways. Today, social media presents another excellent means of connecting African countries. But it seems to be highly underutilised to serve this purpose despite the high number of subscribers.

Africans, especially the youth are positively embracing social media. According to Silver and Johnson (2018: 3) adults younger than 30 are more likely to go online than those aged 50 and older. They are relying on it for information, education and entertainment. This paper explores the growth trajectory of social media on the continent. It presents some opportunities and challenges associated with the use of social media by African youth. It further posits roles diverse stakeholders can play to ensure better and more appropriate use of social media by youths.

## 1- Opportunities Provided by Social Media

Social media has had both positive and negative impact on the socioeconomic wellbeing of African youth. However, it also presents several opportunities to them.

**Social media facilitates easy and faster communication:** The youth are enjoying the opportunity to stay in touch with friends, family and acquaintances through social media platforms. They are also sharing experiences irrespective of their various geographical locations. This gives them some sense of connectivity even beyond their geographical environment. However, a lot of youth are so addicted to this practice that they cannot do without expressing their mood on social media at every point in time.

**Research:** The youth gather information from different social media platforms. Information about market research, audience engagement, user experience, evaluation of campaigns and efforts and consumer insights are accurately available on social media. According to Silver and Johnson (2018), in Nigeria and Kenya, about six-in-ten internet users go online to get information about government services and politics. This rate is the highest, as compared to other African countries.

**Business:** Social media marketing is another opportunity presented to the youth of Africa. As defined by Buffer (2019), "social media marketing is the use of social media platforms to connect with your audience to build your brand, increase sales, and drive website traffic". This involves publishing great content on your social media profiles, listening to and engaging your followers, analysing your results, and running social media advertisements. Social media marketing includes activities like posting text and image updates, videos, and other content that drives audience engagement, as well as paid social media advertising to attract viewers' interest in a product or service being advertised. Young entrepreneurs are using social media platforms to advertise their products and services at minimal cost. In Nigeria the average advertising cost per social media site stands at 10,000 Naira a day. Adhang (2019) estimates the daily reach for the sponsored adverts to range between 9,000 to 25,000 impressions for adverts worth 10,000 Naira. Social media marketing has helped businesses and

### CASE IN POINT:

The perspectives of two young Ghanaian entrepreneurs who have adopted social media marketing to promote their business services were considered to illustrate the extent to which social media marketing is relevant to businesses.

*"I have been promoting the business (My Home Teacher) for about four years now on social media; since 2015. We have experienced a drastic increase in sales over the past years, from 2015 to 2019. Our client retention rate is three out of five per month. There has always been yearly increase in sales. My business has a target market of parents within the higher to middle income bracket. These parents are technologically savvy, so they tend to embrace the usage of social media more often since it is often used by the elite in society. We use Facebook most often in promoting our business because a lot of clients are available on that platform".*

**Eric Vondee**

C.E.O, My Home Teacher



*"We have been promoting Think Emmy's Interior Decor on social media for the past ten months and to be honest, it has been of great benefit to the business. Most of the orders we get are as a result of our presence on social media and word of mouth. Most people who contact us for our services tell us they saw our posts on social media before contacting us. Our presence on social media has given us a lot of exposure and clients. We chose social media as our promotion platform because it has now become an effective medium to connect with customers, employees and investors. Unlike ten years ago, social media is no longer new to a lot of people. We use Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, depending on our target audience and the nature of the message at a point in time".*

**Emelda Adjei**

C.E.O, Think Emmy Interior Decor



social entrepreneurs to achieve several goals, such as: increasing website traffic, building conversations on products and services they deliver, raising brand awareness, creating a brand identity and positive brand association, improving communication and interaction with key audiences. Social media has proven to be the right place to be if an entrepreneur wants to get wide audience for their products.

**Publicising talent:** The youth are also displaying their talents on social media and are attracting investors and fans. This explains how Odehyieba Priscilla, a thirteen-year-old Ghanaian gospel musician has now become one of the most popular gospel musicians in Ghana after her singing talent was and is still being displayed on some social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube. Currently, she is being followed by 56,402 people on Facebook and has over 170,000 subscribers on YouTube. Eleven-year-old Nigerian, Emmanuella Samuel of Mark Angel Comedy became famous through short comic episodes that were disseminated through social media. She now has over 215,000 YouTube subscribers.

**Social accountability tool:** Berabely (2019) posits that, "the presence of social media and its increased use by citizens as a tool to demand social justice is helping citizens gain grounds in making their voices heard and demand accountability." Social media is now serving as a tool for citizens to demand social justice and accountability from duty bearers. Through social media, the youth share their views and knowledge about ongoing discourse on issues of national interest. In the advent of increased civic repressions demonstrated by a clamp down on citizen's voices and the deliberate and constant violation of citizen's rights, social media provides tools for citizens to challenge this trend.

**Education:** A lot of African youths are learning different skills and trades (which hitherto could only be learnt at paid seminars and educational institutions) from social media platforms. This has made great positive impact on their –academic, and career ventures. These skills include public speaking, cake making and decoration, dress making, hair styling, event planning, catering among others. Their skills and confidence are boosted when they acquire such knowledge and they can leverage on these skills to live more independent lives. Also, a lot of them are gaining income from social media platforms like YouTube for displaying educational or entertaining videos and getting a lot of views.



## 2 - Challenges with the Use of Social Media

Despite the enormous opportunities social media presents to African youths, there are compounding challenges with the growing use of social media by the youth.

**Limited internet access:** Although there is a steady growth in internet penetration in Africa, the overall internet penetration on the continent is low. According to 2011 estimates, about 13.5% of the African population had Internet access. While Africa accounts for 15.0% of the world's population, only 6.2% of the World's Internet users are Africans. Internet access is also irregularly distributed, with two thirds of overall online activity in Africa being generated in South Africa; which only accounts for 5% of the continent's population (Internet World Statistics, 2011). This shows that the proportion of the population who do not have access to internet is high. This population (which includes the youth) is therefore deprived of all the benefits that social media has to offer.

**Negative effect on culture:** "The Internet always has had an anything-goes atmosphere where flame wars and harsh language are common. Now there are more places than ever for people to spout their thoughts — often with relative anonymity — thanks to the explosion in blogs, social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace, and comments sections on nearly every news site", (Kornblum, 2007).



Evidently, social media has had some negative effects on the general behaviour of some African youth. The general African culture value of youth demonstrating respect, especially to elders, is perceived to be fading out based on how the youth exploit social media platforms.

Experts also argue that people sometimes actually forget that they're speaking out loud when they post a snarky comment-writing something from a smartphone almost seems like you're talking only to yourself Bernstein (2012). Recent abusive use social media by youths was demonstrated in Cote d'Ivoire. Fans of popular Ivorian musician 'DJ Arafat' – known as Les Chinoise – removed the late musician's corpse from his grave to confirm it was his body. Their abusive use of social media was demonstrated by the posting of pictures and videos of the deceased on social media platforms. Posting of nude pictures, use of slanderous words and the use of social media for character defamation are some adverse ways through which African youth engage on social media and this is perceived not to conform with traditional cultural values.

**A source of psychological disorders:** Social media has led to a lot of anxiety and depression among the youth. A research conducted in 2018 by Melissa G. Hunt, et. Al., of the University of Pennsylvania on 143 undergraduates, revealed that students who limited their use of Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat to 30 minutes a day for three weeks had significant reductions in loneliness and depression as compared to a control group that made no changes to their social media diet. "The results from our experiment strongly suggest that limiting social media usage does have a direct and positive impact on subjective well-being over time, especially with respect to decreasing loneliness and depression. That is, ours is the first study to establish a clear causal link between decreasing social media use, and improvements in loneliness and depression. It is ironic, but perhaps not surprising, that reducing social media, which promised to help us connect with others, actually helps people feel less lonely and depressed" Hunt, Marx, Lipson and Young (2018). As explained by Bernstein (2012), "by continually presenting only our "best selves" online and reaping the emotional benefits of lots of "likes" on Facebook for instance, psychologists say our self-esteem may bloom disproportionately -- and negatively impact self-control. The result? You'll feel entitled to be an online meanie".



## 3 - Recommendations and Conclusion

The above demonstrated challenges that result from the increased exposure of social media to African youths necessitate an urgent action from different actors within society including the youth.

Governments, CSOs and all stakeholders need to come together to plan on a strategic way of effectively and efficiently connecting African countries through social media in order to achieve social and economic growth.

**CSOs** that work on youth related causes (and CSOs that work on other social groups like females, disabled, among others) should sensitise the youth and other stakeholders on how to responsibly use social media for their benefits.

**CSOs** in Africa should take it as one of their major responsibilities to educate the youth on how to communicate and make comments on social media and also let them know the effects bad comments can have on their personal reputations and their chances of getting certain positions and employment opportunities.

Also, youth need to play a central role in making utmost use of social media. They should consciously uphold responsible behaviours in all social media engagements. As discussed by Hunt, Marx, Lipson and Young (2018), "although it can be recommended to limit social media usage to approximately 30 minutes a day, any such use of social media that exceeds this recommended time frame should be dedicated for judicious purposes". This can be for research, job search, to advertise their businesses (like Eric Vondee and Emelda Adjei) or to promote their talent (like Emmanuella and Odehyieba Priscilla).

Social media is an asset that can be used to propel development on the continent. Its effective use by African youth, who are of course the majority on the continent, is crucial in ensuring that social media serves as an enabler of the achievement of the anticipated development of the continent, notably Africa's Agenda 2063. Therefore, letting youth from across the continent to share ideas, innovations and progressive views that would lead to the socio-economic growth of the continent. The cross fertilisation of ideas and innovations among African youth, regarded as Africa's top but underutilised potential, is an indispensable ingredient to catalyse growth and development on the continent. And to realise this, social media is a reliable and promising vehicle to achieve this end.

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